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SUBJECT: U.S. TRIPARTITE DELEGATION MEMBERS DISCUSS HUMAN
RIGHTS WITH RWANDAN PARLIAMENTARIANS

¶1. Summary: During a May 24 meeting with Ambassador Arietti and visiting U.S. Tripartite Plus delegation members, Rwandan parliamentarians discussed the gap between perception and reality on Rwanda's performance on human rights. They asserted that outsiders criticize Rwanda without fully understanding Rwanda's unique culture and history, but acknowledged that Rwanda needs to do better through public diplomacy to correct any negative, inaccurate perception. They also acknowledged that "divisionism" and "genocide ideology" are vaguely defined terms which should be defined according to international norms. They considered criticisms regarding press freedom as "unfair" and characterized the political forum as a useful innovation for political debate and dissent. End summary.

¶2. Five members of Parliament, representing a cross-section of political parties, participated: Muslim leader Sheik Abdul Karim Harelimana (Rwandan Patriotic Front), Chamber of Deputies; Jacqueline Muhongayire (Social Democratic Party), Chamber of Deputies; Senator Joseph Karemera (Rwandan Patriotic Front); Senator Odette Nyiramilimo (Liberal Party); and Senator Alvera Mukabaramba (Progress and Concord Party, former member of MDR - Republican Democratic Movement). Also in attendance was Ed Barber, Senior Adviser on African Development, Good Works International, Washington, D.C.

Regional Conflict Resolution

¶3. The parliamentarians stressed the importance of regional security and the role of Amani ("peace" in Swahili) Forum, a network of parliamentarians in the Great Lakes region who are committed to conflict prevention and resolution within their own countries and in the region. Amani was created in 1998 to provide a regional forum to enable parliamentarians to work together to eliminate armed conflict and to promote peace and democratic governance. Currently, it has a membership of over 650 parliamentarians, with national chapters in seven countries (Burundi, DRC, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia). Parliamentarians in the region meet regularly through this forum to discuss peaceful conflict resolution.

Perception-Reality Gap

¶4. Ed Barber, Senior Adviser on African Development at Good Works International, a D.C.-based consulting firm, noted that while Rwanda has not been criticized for its economic policies and development, it has been criticized on democracy and human rights despite its "remarkably consistent" progress over the past 12 years, which Good Works chairman Andrew Young described as a "miracle." Barber described a gap between reality and perception;

outsiders perceive Rwanda in a more negative light than reflected by the reality on the ground.

¶5. Sen. Karemera acknowledged that Rwanda has been "very bad" about publicizing the country's positive aspects and progress. As a result, he said, Rwanda has become known for the worst (the genocide) and not for the good.

Human Rights

¶6. Sen. Nyiramilimo commented that outsiders' perceptions of human rights in Rwanda differ from Rwandan parliamentarians' views because outsiders fail to understand and to take into account the context of Rwanda's unique culture, turbulent history, and widespread poverty.

¶7. Sen. Karemera agreed that "divisionism" and "genocide ideology" are vaguely defined terms, and acknowledged that it is Rwanda's "homework" to characterize them according to international norms. He objected, however, to criticisms regarding press freedom, noting that Americans find it difficult to understand the state of the press because of Rwanda's unique culture.

¶8. He observed that there have been no problems with VOA or BBC, and that Rwanda has 13 independent newspapers and 8 private radio stations, but that "if you have opponents of the government you must mobilize against your enemy." He estimated that currently, after decentralization of the government, 45-60 percent of local government officials are women. He also noted that the Rwandan government was the first to prosecute and imprison members of its own army to the extent that it has.

Political Space

¶9. According to Sen. Karemera, the government has shared as much power as possible, and the Constitution was the product of a consultative process among all the parties. He expressed his view that the political forum is an important and useful innovation as it provides an arena for political parties to criticize each other and to discuss strategy, leadership, and socio-economic development.

¶10. Sen. Nyiramilimo explained that each party has four representatives (two men, two women) who participate in the forum, which meets every two months. She noted that the current spokesperson, elected to a three-year term, is a member of the Rwandan Patriotic Front while the vice spokesperson is a member of the Social Democratic Party, but that other parties can hold those elected positions. She affirmed that participants have openly disagreed on various occasions and on various issues and that the RPF will amend a law if others object to it. The forum prepares communiques which are available to the press.

¶11. Karemera commented that as "students of democracy" Rwandan parliamentarians advocate wide exposure to other parliaments and best practices. They have studied the parliamentary systems of the U.K., Sweden, and the Netherlands. Ambassador Arietti agreed that communication with and visits to other parliaments are critical and that having the opportunity to ask questions and to share information broadens understanding on both sides.

THURSTON